

The News Framing of the ‘Syria Fighters’ in Flanders and the Netherlands:

Victims or terrorists?

INTRODUCTION

A lot of disturbing events took place since the start of the Syrian conflict in March 2011: complex developments in Syria and neighboring countries, threatening the stability of the region. Meanwhile, Western Europe was shaken by the attack at the Jewish museum in Brussels, the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris, the twin terror attacks in Copenhagen. But how were the ‘Syria fighters’ⁱ depicted at the beginning of the Syrian conflict? And how did their portrayal evolve over time? This article examines the media coverage on the young Flemishⁱⁱ and Dutch Syria fighters who left their homeland to join the insurgents in their fight against President Bashar al-Assad in 2013. To answer these questions, Dutch and Flemish newspaper articles were analyzed. The results show how journalists and their quoted sources portray the Syria fighters and how prevalent these interpretations are.

Interpretations in media texts shape stories and are also referred to as frames, which can be viewed as “latent messages from the journalist oriented to the receiver” that promote a particular way of understanding the issue (Van Gorp, 2005, p. 487). The framing of issues such as the Syria fighters is pertinent as former research has shown that the frames applied by journalists shape the opinions of those exposed to them in various situations (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2012). When uncertain how to interpret an issue, readers of news media may take the perspectives or frames used by journalists into account. Journalists frequently frame ethnic cultural minorities as either a threat to the status quo or as victims in need of help (Van Gorp, 2005). Islam and Muslims have been portrayed in an especially negative light in news coverage across Europe (d’Haenens & Bink, 2006; Malcolm, Bairner & Curry, 2010; Shahid, 2005).

Since the 9/11 attacks increased coverage of terrorism has tended to associate ‘Islamic culture’ with ‘terrorism’ (Ruigrok & Atteveldt, 2007). This trend in the news coverage seems to go hand in hand with increasing Islamophobia (Commission on British Muslims and

Islamophobia, 2004), rendering the Syria fighter issue a particularly important topic for a thorough analysis. The aims of this study are therefore: (1) to analyze Dutch and Flemish press coverage of the Syria fighters; (2) to define the frames used to depict the issue; and (3) to measure their prevalence, as well as ascertain which sources are quoted or paraphrased using which frames. The latter is vital to better understand how media frames may shape public perceptions of Syria fighters and by extension the Muslim population at large.

FRAMING AND FRAME CONSTRUCTION

The current study is situated within the constructionist paradigm (for an overview of paradigms within communication science see Beniger, 1993; D'Angelo, 2002; Rosengren, 1993). This constructionist paradigm views frames as “interpretative packages”, created by journalists and partly based on the perspective of sources invested in politics (i.e. frame-advocates). According to the reasoning of this paradigm, frame construction by journalists is influenced by several factors, such as cultural resonance, suitability with media routines, and activities undertaken by frame advocates (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), as well as the journalists' personal interpretations, and organizational (e.g. ideological origin of newspapers) and societal factors (Brüggeman, 2014).

Certain framing devices that communicate a frame to the audience have a higher cultural resonance, because they fit with the cultural themes of national or transnational issue culture (Brüggeman, 2014; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). As a result, a repository of frames is available to every culture and can be used to clarify events. Both journalists and their audience draw upon these repositories to give meaning to certain events, so that dominant cultural norms and values are reproduced (Van Gorp, 2010). While cultural resonance does not significantly change over time, the prominence of certain frames does fluctuate in accordance with the activities of frame advocates. These advocates are usually affiliated with organizations (e.g.

governmental, social movements), pursuing a collective agenda by offering journalists materials that suggest frames which serve their interests. In other words, advocates influence the prominence of certain frames, although journalists always have to alter the material in some way (e.g. shortening a quote), thereby selecting some aspects and making them more “salient” (Entman, 1993, p.52).

Media routines also have an impact on frame prominence. The balance norm, for example, requires that competing opinions are presented in the same news accounts, which is usually achieved by quoting spokespersons with clashing perspectives. However, journalists tend to have relationships with official frame-advocates and are less likely to challenge them (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), so the balance norm might not be followed in some cases. Additionally, journalists can contextualize frames, thereby providing the audience with indirect clues on which frame is more fitting in a particular situation (De Vreese, 2012), for instance by using scare quotes or questioning an experts credibility. Journalist can thus “*frame the frames provided by the external actors* [emphasis added]” (Brüggemann, 2014, p. 66). Journalists themselves are often not aware of the ideological components in their writings, which has been labeled as ‘frame-blindness’ (Mara, 2013).

Media frames and ideology that they convey are important, because they guide the way the audience thinks. Iyengar (1990) argued that framing of terrorism is especially susceptible to framing effects, as most people do not understand the related international conflicts and complex foreign ideology. Iyengar studied framing effects and distinguished between episodic and thematic frames. The *episodic* frame consists of concrete examples of cases that are considered illustrative of a certain issue. The *thematic* frame, by contrast, takes the form of a background report in which an issue is placed in a more abstract context. This difference in focus on the individual or contextual level can impact who is deemed responsible for the framed issue. The more news is framed episodically, the more the public attributes the

responsibility for the issue to specific individuals, whereas the more news is framed thematically, the more the public attributed responsibility to society as a whole (Iyengar, 1990).

FRAMING AND SOCIAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Topics related to ethnic cultural minorities and Muslims have been studied relatively frequently, however, news media framing of Muslims and Islam in news media in Flanders has received considerably less attention than in the Netherlandsⁱⁱⁱ. Roggeband and Vliegenthart (2007) conducted a longitudinal analysis of media frames on immigrants in the Netherlands. They constructed a framing typology consisting of five frames. One of these frames places immigration in a positive light (i.e. the multicultural frame), while all other frames present immigration as problematic, tending to point towards some aspects of immigrants that are presented as inferior to Dutch and associated norms. Specifically, Muslim culture and religion are presented as a threat to Dutch norms and values, such as separation of church and state, acceptance of homosexuality, gender equality, and freedom of speech (Roggeband & Vliegenthart, 2007). A similar line of inquiry was taken by d'Haenens and Bink (2006), who conducted a media frame analysis of Islam in The Netherlands. The Dutch media mostly presented Islam using the 'economic consequences', 'responsibility' and 'morality' frames, often problematizing Islamic culture.

Social identity and in- and out-group processes are critical for understanding news production and structures in news stories that focus on ethnic cultural minorities. Social identity theory implies that group membership is associated with positive or negative connotations, and that people tend to view themselves and their group positively rather than negatively. This means that people will mostly consider in-groups more favorably than out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Verkuyten, 2005; Verkuyten & Reijerse, 2008). Consequently, the ethnic cultural

backgrounds of frame-advocates, journalists, and readers impact both frame construction and the way certain issues are interpreted. Intergroup comparison is an important factor for the evaluation of in-groups, and it impacts the self-image of group-members. Once a positive self-image has been established, it has to be maintained. People thus tend to differentiate in-groups from out-groups by identifying and constructing elements in which they evaluate their own group as superior (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981; Verkuyten, 2005; Verkuyten & Reijerse, 2008). This is apparent in the frames identified in the study by Roggeband and Vliegenthart (2007) as most frames present Dutch values as superior to those of immigrants.

To gain a better understanding on the framing of Syria fighters, social identity theory is relevant. Interpretation of news articles related to (political) violence committed by Muslims will be experienced differently depending on group membership, as shown by a survey-study on the Dutch population's perceptions of the Syria fighter issue (Moha & Bovendeert, 2013). Dutch Muslims mostly regard the Syria fighters as heroes who are doing what the United Nations refuse to do, namely support the rebels in their fight against al-Assad. In contrast, the vast majority of the non-Muslim Dutch population rejects the notion of the Syria fighters being heroes and over 40% views those who return to the Netherlands as potential terrorists whose Dutch citizenship should be revoked. Group membership might account for this divide in opinion between non-Muslim and Muslim Dutch citizens.

A number of research questions can be drawn based on the considerations mentioned above:

1. Which frames are used to depict the Syria fighters in the news coverage in the Netherlands and Flanders?
2. Do right- and left-leaning newspapers use different frames?

3. How are various frame-advocates quoted or paraphrased in the news coverage, and which frames do they use?

METHOD

Approach

The ‘frame package’ term is based on the notion of ‘media package’ (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). A frame package is an integrated structure of logical framing devices and a chain of reasoning devices that promote a particular interpretation of a topic (Van Gorp, 2010). When analyzing frames in news reporting, one should look at both reasoning devices and framing devices (Reese, 2010), as these two devices make up the frame package (Van Gorp, 2007). Reasoning devices refer to “roots (i.e. causal analysis), consequences (i.e. particular type of effect), and appeals to principle (i.e. set of moral claims) and framing devices refer to “metaphors, exemplars (i.e., historical examples from which lessons are drawn), catchphrases, depictions, and visual images” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3-4). Such aspects of the operationalization can be brought together in a frame matrix whose rows represent the frames and whose columns characterize the framing and reasoning devices apparent in the media discourse (Van Gorp, 2010).

This study incorporates both an inductive and a deductive framing analysis. The framing and reasoning devices were studied for the inductive framing analysis ($n = 360$) using content analysis, whereby manifest elements of the text were coded with the goal of demonstrating the “*relationship between the abstract frame and the pattern of elements in the news text that are able to evoke the core side of the receiver*” (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 90). Based on literature research, various possible factors relevant to the framing of the Syria fighter issue were identified and used as sensitizing concepts to explore the data. Iteratively alternating literature

research, data collection, and content analysis made it possible to both gain an in-depth understanding of the issue and maintain a certain level of objectivity (cf. Van Gorp, 2010).

Sample selection

For the inductive sample articles, columns and readers' letters were selected in the quality and popular newspapers boasting the highest circulation in each country. For the Netherlands the left-leaning quality newspaper *De Volkskrant* and the popular newspaper *de Telegraaf* were selected; for Flanders the right-leaning quality newspaper *De Standaard* and the popular newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* (HLN) were selected. For the deductive sample, the left-leaning quality newspaper *De Morgen* was added for Flanders, as well as the right-leaning quality newspaper *NRC* for the Netherlands. The deductive sample was composed of 121 articles for the Netherlands and 296 for Flanders.

All articles mentioning involvement in the Syrian civil war of Dutch, Flemish or Western men or women were included in the sample. Article selection was based on keywords^{iv} about the Syria fighters from the *Mediargus*, *Gopress Academic* and *LexisNexis* databases, starting from the beginning of the conflict (March 2011). The first articles mentioning participation of Dutch or Flemish people in the Syrian conflict appeared in March and July of 2012, respectively. All articles containing keywords on Syria fighters were included in the sample, although some were later excluded due to low relevance. For instance, some stories did not focus on Flemish or Dutch young men fighting in Syria, but on Syrian rebels who received funds from a Flemish youth charity. Data collection continued until the end of October 2013. As such, the return of Jejoen Bontinck to his home country could be

included in the sample.

Analysis procedures

To increase reliability in the inductive phase, single frame elements were coded instead of holistic, abstract frames (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). When the frames were constructed and described in a matrix, an additional analysis cycle was used to sort all newspaper articles according to the frame typology. If an article could not be placed within the typology, it pointed towards an unidentified frame or an article without a frame (Van Gorp, 2010). We considered the constructed frames as valid because all articles (or paragraphs) could be classified within the existing typology or did not contain a frame, which implies that there was no overlap between the frames. The frames could thus be used to classify the described roles of the Syria fighters in the newspaper articles as belonging exclusively to one of the frames. The inductive analysis led to the identification of five frames: The ‘terrorist’ frame, the ‘victim’ frame, the ‘martyr’ frame, the ‘Don Quixote’ frame and the ‘adventurer’ frame.

The deductive analysis was conducted on a larger sample ($N = 417$) and consisted in coding the article’s first three frames as well as the actors who expressed them. Both actors and frames were coded as dichotomous variables. The types of actors that were most salient in the frames in the inductive analysis were included in the deductive phase. A distinction was made between journalists and various types of frame-advocates (i.e. religious institutions’ representatives, members of extremist groups, experts, family members, members of local and national governments). The framing and reasoning devices from the inductive analysis were used as indicators during the deductive analysis. Actors were coded as expressing a frame if the text contained either an explicit reference to a framing device, or a reasoning device that could be inferred from the text. Journalists were coded as expressing a frame if the article contained framing or reasoning devices outside of quoted or paraphrased text. One indicator

was sufficient to code a frame as present.

The following variables were coded for each article ($N = 417$): date, article title, newspaper title, episodic or thematic article structure, the first three actors and the frames they express (multiple frames possible per actor). A 10% random sample was tested for intercoder reliability ($n = 42$) using *Krippendorffs' Alpha* (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Deliberation between the first and second coder occurred during the training, but the eventual intercoder test occurred independently. This procedure led to a relatively high reliability for the deductive phase: $\alpha = .80$ for the 'terrorist' frame, $\alpha = .86$ for the 'victim' frame, $\alpha = .92$ for the 'martyr' frame, $\alpha = .91$ for the 'Don Quixote' frame and, $\alpha = .88$ for the 'adventurer' frame. The outcome variables were measured as dichotomous variables, so we used a logistic regression to assess the relative importance of several predictors of frame use^v.

RESULTS

Peaks in press coverage

The frequency of press coverage over time can be viewed in Figure 1. For Flanders, the first peak in the reporting started in March 2013, when two young Islam converts Brian De Mulder and Jejoen Bontinck left for Syria. The boys' parents and family members were quoted frequently, with extremist organization Sharia4Belgium and its spokesperson Fouad Belkacem (De Waele, Pauwels, Ponsaers & Schils, 2013) being presented as the main culprits. The peak reach its height in April 2013 when background articles were published on various Syria fighter related subjects. The last news peak occurred in October 2013 and concerned Jejoen's return. It consisted of critical articles on the motives behind his journey as well as many readers' comments. The main sentiment of these letters is best exemplified by a column entitled "Go Home Jejoen" (HLN, October 19 2013, p. 2). The column argues that the convert's decision to

join the rebels in Syria and his preference for an Islamic state are evidence of treachery to Belgium and that he should therefore return to ‘his home’- Syria.

In the Netherlands, the first and only peak also occurred around March 2013, when the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV) announced that the terrorism threat level had increased from limited to substantial, due to the departure of the Syria fighters. Around that time most publications were short articles with thematic frames focusing on national safety. They regularly quoted NCTV members, as well as terrorism and radicalization scholars. The reporting decreased after April, although some notable events occurred. The survey-study on the Dutch population’s perceptions of the Syria fighter issue was published in May 2013, which might have triggered some opinion pieces and readers’ comments (Moha & Bovendeert, 2013). Most columns and letters expressed weariness with the Islam debate and criticized the perspectives of the other side (i.e. proponents of left-leaning, multicultural policies ridiculed proponents of the more right-wing, anti-multicultural position, and vice versa). In August 2013, a number of articles were published on judicial measures that could be taken to prosecute Syria fighters. A court decided that preparing for violent Jihad was in and of itself a criminal offence that should be punishable by law without proof of actual war crimes, calling it “one of the most serious violations of the rule of law and the principles of democracy” (De Telegraaf, 24 October 2013, p. 9).

*** FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE ***

Syria fighter frames

The inductive framing analysis led to the identification of five frames, each frame giving a different perspective on the question: ‘What role does the Syria fighter play in the Syrian civil war?’ Table 1 presents a matrix of these five frames, based on the most salient and distinctive

framing and rhetoric devices that emerged from the analysis. Two of the frames, i.e. the ‘terrorist’ frame and the ‘victim’ frame, *problematize* the issue. In contrast, the ‘martyr’, ‘Don Quixote’ and ‘adventurer’ frames depict the journey to Syria as an individual choice and an *unproblematic* situation. Table 2 shows that the problematizing frames are very common in news coverage, appearing in most news articles, while the non-problematizing frames are far less frequent.

Terrorist frame. This frame revolves around the radicalization of Muslims, national security and preventing a possible terrorist attack in the Netherlands or Belgium. Radicalized Muslims are viewed as not loyal to democracy and associated values, which they reject in favor of an Islamic state with *sharia* (fundamentalist Islamic law). The news stories suggest that radicalized Muslims are intent on spreading their extremist reasoning to others, who they hope will join their cause. ‘Us’ versus ‘them’ issues related to social identity theory and group perspective (i.e. the ‘West’ versus ‘Islam’) are very apparent in this frame as is exemplified in the next quote from a readers’ letter:

He [Jejoen] has let the world know that an Islamic state is the best way to govern a nation [...] Which is a huge slap in the face for all of us. Our ancestors fought to bring democratic rights to everyone. Those who want to completely change the course of history and establish an Islamic state should be considered as a national threat (HLN, October 21 2013, p.46)

According to this frame’s reasoning, the best way to deal with the situation would be to implement restrictive measures to stop Syria fighters from undertaking their journey. The threat lies mainly in returning jihadists: “They can pose a security risk because of their expertise, ideological dedication and combat experience upon return” (De Volkskrant, 14 March 2013, p. 11). So, if they do manage to leave, they should be prevented from returning, or at least detained

to stop them from spreading their extremist beliefs and inspire others to follow in their footsteps. They are described as “ticking time bombs” (De Morgen, June 1 2013, p. 62) who can no longer function in a harmonious society.

Victim frame. The ‘victim’ frame depicts, first, the Syria fighter as ‘under the spell’ of the manipulative recruitment techniques of an Islamic extremist and, second, the journey to Syria as the consequence of unfortunate circumstances as is reflected in the following quote:

A perfectly normal boy ... Until he came into contact with Sharia4Belgium. A half year later he spoke Arabic, prayed five times a day and called us ‘whores who were going to hell’ ... They brainwashed our boy¹. (HLN, March 14 2013, p.8)

The recruiter ‘senses’ the vulnerability of the youths, caused by some sort of emotional trouble, and uses this situation to disconnect them from their family and other social ties. The indoctrination process is complete when the individual leaves everything behind to “serve as cannon fodder in Syria” (De Standaard, June 15 2013, p.18). The journey is thus not presented as a choice, but as something that happens to the Syria fighter. The best solution to the problem would be to support the youths in ways that reduce their sensitivity to extremist rhetoric. The ‘victims’ were generally presented as being prototypical youth by emphasizing aspects of their personality that are considered ‘normal’, like “passion for playing soccer” (De Standaard, 14 March 2013, p. 14) or “participating in TV program ‘Move like Michael Jackson’” (HLN, 22 March 2013, p. 5). This ‘normality’ is then juxtaposed with the perceived ‘strangeness’ of the fundamentalist Muslim that the previously normal youngster has become. The ‘victim’ frame is mostly used to describe the recruitment and radicalization of the Flemish converts, and sometimes used to describe the recruitment and radicalization of the Flemish and Dutch Muslims.

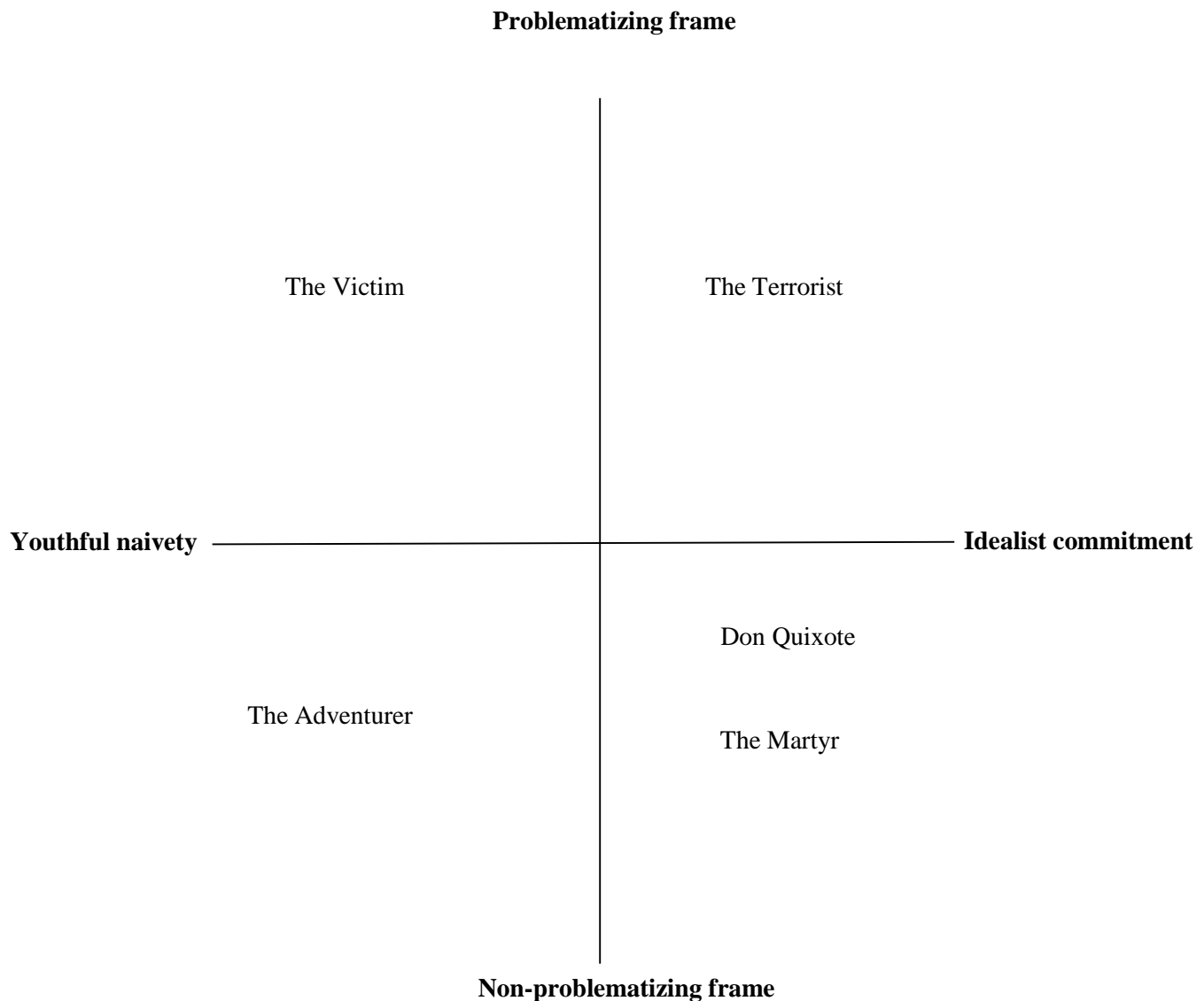
Adventurer frame. The ‘adventurer’ frame portrays the decision as stemming from ‘foolish naivety’ steeped in a longing for excitement and an inability to understand the consequences of one’s actions. The journey the youths undertake is often described as “an (ill-advised) adventure” and their expectations of jihad and civil war as “distorted Disneyesque ...fantasies (De Telegraaf, 5 January 2013, p. 1). So, the frame is not presented as a solution to the civil war but as a situation that will resolve itself, because the romantic views of the youngsters will be shattered as they are confronted with the harsh realities of Syria’s conflict.

Don Quixote frame. The ‘Don Quixote’ frame depicts the choice to go to Syria as a consequence of moral outrage in the face of the violence Syrian citizens are shown to be enduring and an idealist commitment to a humanitarian and secular cause. The motivation thus is humanitarian and not linked to Islam or religion. The Syria fighters motivations are deproblematized through a comparison with historical examples where foreign fighters were viewed as heroes, such as the civil war in Yugoslavia (De Volkskrant, 8 June 2013, p. 35). Tragic hero Don Quixote exemplifies this frame, as he is committed to the cause of helping others, “for which he is ready to endure untold misery” (Turgenev & Spiegel, p. 94). However, this frame is not presented as a solution either as the Syria fighters are not expected to be effective owing to the rebels’ Islamic radicalization. In a way, they are battling windmills instead of giants: while they meant to help the Syrian people, they end up fighting an Islamist war.

Martyr frame. The martyr frame portrays the issue in conservative Islamic terms and embodies the in-group perspective. It depicts the Syria fighters not as a problem, but as a solution to the demise of Islam due to perceived secularization of the Ummah (international Muslim community) and Western influence. The Syria fighters are compelled by religious duty. The highest honor they can receive is to be killed on the battlefield in their jihad to establish an Islamic state. This frame also embodies certain ‘us’ versus ‘them’ tendencies (i.e. ‘Islam’ versus

the ‘West’) as can be seen in the next quote from a Syria fighter: “Don’t expect anything from the West. Your only ally is Allah” (Het Laatste Nieuws, 16 July 2012, p. 9).

Figure 2: *Relationships between identified frames*



The ‘terrorist’ frame views the situation from the opposite perspective as compared to the ‘martyr’ frame, a Western viewpoint, which represents the out-group perspective. The relationships between frames are visualized in Figure 2. The main difference between the ‘Don Quixote’ and the ‘martyr’ frames is the source of the idealistic commitment: the ‘Don Quixote’

is depicted as purely motivated by secular and humanitarian ideals, and the ‘martyr’ as inspired by religious ideals and wanting to help his ‘brothers and sisters’. The main difference between the ‘victim’ and ‘adventurer’ frames is the role of youthful naivety. The ‘victims’ are portrayed as searching for something to hold on to in terms of identity, with recruiters taking advantage of this weakness, while the ‘adventurers’ actively choose to go to Syria.

Table 1: *Frame matrix 'Syria fighters'*

Frame	Reasoning devices					Framing devices	
	Definition of the problem /situation	Cause	Consequences	Possible solutions	Moral values	Archetypes/ Myths	Catchphrases & lexical choices
Terrorist	Young people join the ranks of Al Qaida to fight for the radical Islam and Islamic state in Syria	Muslims are not loyal to the values associated with democracy and liberalism and try to spread their extremist views	The likelihood that an terrorist attack will occur in Belgium or the Netherlands has become substantially greater than before	Restrictive measures against radical organizations and increased surveillance in Muslim communities to stop them leaving/returning	Rejecting democracy in favor of an Islamic state and associated values (out-group perspective)	Myth of the scapegoat	It's questionable if they can function in a harmonious society without violence. This can mean danger to <i>our</i> security ticking time bombs Labels: jihadists, militant radicals, extremists, radical lunatics, salafists
Victim	Young people are being manipulated to go fight in Syria by religious extremists	The youngsters are susceptible for the brainwashing techniques of the recruiters because of their troubled background	They are used as cannon fodder, financially exploited and not allowed to leave	Supportive measures to make the youngsters less susceptible to the extremist rhetoric	Abused and manipulated to serve as cannon fodder Easy prey	Myth of the victim	This has to be stopped before there are more victims. A lot of these boys are in a hopeless situation. They are unemployed, have no future and are easy prey
Martyr	Young Muslims decide to help their brothers and sister in Syria as a part of their religious duty	The Mujahideen are motivated by the suffering of their brothers and sisters of the international Ummah and perceived disrespect and threat from the west to Islam	The fighters will possibly have the honor of sacrificing themselves for their faith and support the Ummah in the process, as well as get to paradise	The situation is presented as the solution to the problem of demise of the Islam due to the west and secularization of the Ummah	Self-sacrifice, honor and pride Dedication to religion: purity of faith (in-group perspective)	The Martyr	Don't expect anything from the west. Your only ally is Allah I want to die as a warrior, killed by an infidel. There is no other God than Allah Labels: Holy war, sharia state,
Don Quixote	Idealist choose to help the population in Syria	Disgust with the atrocities committed in Syria and desire to help the population	The experience will have a formative effect on their personality and will make them who they are	The situation is not really problematized	Humanitarianism, secularism Idealist commitment, and bravery	Tragic hero: Don Quixote	... boys who are shocked by the horrific images of the war and want to take action ...are motivated by a sense of justice ... convinced by their ideal: freedom
Adventurer	Naïve adventurers choose to go to Syria to fight with the rebels	Longing for adventure and youthful ignorance on the consequences of their actions	Their romantic views of the civil war and bravery will be shattered as they are confronted with reality	The situation is not really problematized	Youthful ignorance and naivety	Naive youths	... the longing for adventure also plays a part Labels: patat-jihadist, Jihad-Jordy, polderjihadist, daredevils, jihad travelers

Table 2: Average presence of frames per newspaper (in percentages)

Frame	The Netherlands		Flanders				Total
	<i>De Telegraaf</i> ^a <i>n</i> = 39	<i>NRC</i> ^b <i>n</i> = 35	<i>De Volkskrant</i> ^b <i>n</i> = 47	<i>HLN</i> ^a <i>n</i> = 140	<i>De Standaard</i> ^b <i>n</i> = 99	<i>De Morgen</i> ^b <i>n</i> = 57	
<i>Terrorist</i>	82	74	73	81	72	71	76
<i>Victim</i>	37	58	59	36	57	59	50
<i>Martyr</i>	13	29	30	14	21	18	19
<i>Don Quixote</i>	0	10	23	15	15	31	16
<i>Adventurer</i>	11	10	23	3	2	16	8

Note. ^a Popular newspaper ^b Quality newspaper

Frame use: countries and newspapers

Results from a one sample t-test ($t(416) = 13.04, p < .001$) show that the Flemish press devotes significantly more attention to the topic ($n = 296$) than the Dutch press ($n = 121$). The number of frames in each newspaper article ranges from 0 to 4 ($M = 1.32, SD = .65$). Table two illustrates that in both countries similar prominence is given to three of the five frames, with the ‘terrorist’ frame as most dominant, followed by the ‘victim’ and the ‘martyr’ frame. Table three shows that the ‘Don Quixote’ frame is more common in Flanders, while the ‘adventurer’ frame is more prominent in the Netherlands. In addition, Flemish news articles are more frequently structured in episodic frames ($M = .40, SD = .42$) than in the Dutch press ($M = .23, SD = .49$), and this difference is found to be statistically significant ($\beta = .51, p < .01$).

In addition to cross-national comparisons, we looked at differences in frame use according to ideological roots of the newspapers. The left-leaning newspapers use the ‘Don Quixote’ and ‘adventurer’ frames significantly more frequently (Table 3). The quality newspapers use the ‘victim’ and the ‘martyr’ frame more frequently than the ‘terrorist’ frame. The quality papers as well as the more left-leaning newspapers use more non-problematizing frames compared to the more right-wing and popular newspapers. Furthermore, the newspapers in Flanders devote substantially more attention to the Syria fighters and more

frequently portray the issue in episodic terms compared to the Netherlands.

Frame use: actors

The first three frames were coded in the news stories, as well as the actors who expressed them. We used logistic regression analysis to test for the importance of actors (e.g. frame-advocates) as predictors for frame use (Table 3). Family members of the Syria fighters made more frequent use of the 'victim' and 'martyr' frame, while adopting the 'terrorist' frame less frequently (Table 3). Interestingly, actors from the national government more frequently use the 'terrorist' frame, whereas actors from the local government (e.g. mayors) more frequently use the 'victim' frame. Experts mostly use all frames besides the 'terrorist' frame, which is the dominant frame in the total sample. Linear regression analysis shows that experts use significantly more frames ($\beta = 4.12, p < .001$). Contrastingly, actors from extremist organizations almost exclusively use the 'martyr' frame. The actors were also coded as Muslim or non-Muslim so as to test for importance of their social background in their interpretation of the role of the Syria fighter. Muslim actors were found to use the 'Don

Quixote' frame and the 'victim' frame more frequently.

Table 3. Results of the logistic regression analysis testing several predictors for frame use

	<i>'Terrorist'</i> <i>frame</i> Exp(β)	<i>'Victim'</i> <i>frame</i> Exp(β)	<i>'Martyr'</i> <i>frame</i> Exp(β)	<i>'Don Quixote'</i> <i>frame</i> Exp(β)	<i>'Adventurer'</i> <i>frame</i> Exp(β)
<i>Actor predictors</i>					
Muslim	-	2.17**	-	2.79***	-
Religious institution	-		5.55*	-	5.49**
Extremist groups	-		88.01***	-	-
Local government	-	7.12***	-	-	-
National government	9.34***		-	-	3.11**
Family member	0.32***	8.42***	3.84**	-	-
Expert	-	5.04***	6.43***	2.34*	3.32**
Journalists	2.92***		3.09**	-	-
<i>Other predictors</i>					
Country: Netherlands ^a	-	-	-	.44*	2.53*
Ideology: Left-leaning ^b	-	-	-	3.20***	4.27***
Quality newspaper ^c	.59*	2.93**	1.81*	-	-
<i>Note.</i> Significance level at * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; Beta under 1 signifies a negative relationship; Reference category ^a Flanders; ^b right-leaning ideology; ^c popular newspaper					

CONCLUSION

This article studied press coverage on the Syria fighters in Flanders and the Netherlands between March 2012 and October 2013. It has provided an overview of the debate by presenting the frames commonly used to interpret the role of the Syria fighters and the actors using those frames. Not surprisingly, the frames that problematize the Syria fighter situation are used much more frequently than the other frames. The 'terrorist' frame is especially common. Moreover, the frames that depict religion as a motivating force (i.e. 'terrorist', 'victim' and 'martyr' frame) are more common than the frames that revolve around secular beliefs (i.e. 'adventurer' and 'Don Quixote' frame). What is more, less problematic frames (i.e. 'martyr', 'Don Quixote' and 'adventurer') mostly co-occur in articles with problematizing frames (i.e. 'terrorist' and

‘victim’). Journalists usually provide hints on which frame is most appropriate to interpret a situation, thereby delegitimizing the less problematic frames. Brüggemann (2014) states that news products will always reflect the opinions of journalists to a certain degree, although they are mostly unaware of the ideological components in their articles (Mara, 2013). When constructing their frames, the journalists are guided by the foremost societal construction of the issue (i.e. cultural resonance). The Syria fighter case shows that framing related to Muslims is relatively one-sided and problematized in a negative sense.

The frame construction and availability of quotes depend on cultural resonance, which in turn depends partly on dominant (transnational) culture and background of the actors (e.g. social identity and personal interests). So, the frame use by frame-advocates can be explained by looking at their background. Family members use the ‘victim frame’ most frequently, which is the only frame that portrays the journey to Syria as involuntary. Family members may prefer this interpretation because it presents the situation as problematic without placing blame on the youngsters. The ‘terrorist’ frame presumably appeals less to them, as it presents the Syria fighters as traitors to their country. The ‘martyr’ frame stresses positive reasons to travel to Syria, out of commitment to help ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, and could be preferred for that reason.

The interest of politicians leads them to focus on different aspects of the situation: local government representatives focus on helping the local community. As such, they stress the importance of protecting vulnerable youngsters and use the ‘victim’ frame to explain their need for more funding. National government representatives tend to be more concerned with national security, and make more frequent use of the ‘terrorist’ frame to explain the need to take restrictive action against the return of the Syria fighters. The Dutch and Flemish extremist organizations used the ‘martyr’ frame almost exclusively. This frame portrays the role of the ‘fighter’ not as a problem, but as a solution to a perceived decrease of Islamic power due to Western influence and secularization of the Ummah (international Muslim community) and

may be used to provide alternative interpretations to the more ubiquitous ‘terrorist’ frame. Muslims preferred the ‘victim’ and ‘Don Quixote’ frame. The ‘victim’ frame might be employed to emphasize the negative influence that extremist organizations can have on normal, Muslim youth. Additionally, the ‘Don Quixote’ frame represents the secular hero. Its advocates may use it as a counter-argument for the pervasive ‘terrorist’ frame, thereby stressing that the Muslims might have chosen to go to Syria not because of their religion, but due to the values that they share with their host-country (i.e. values related to freedom and liberalism). The more frequent use of these frames shows the importance of in-group favoritism and of the social identity theory. It also upholds the finding in the survey study (Moha & Bovendeert, 2013): Muslim advocates are more likely to view the Syria fighters as heroes doing what the UN refuses to do, namely help the Syrian people.

Some differences in the press coverage can be discerned between Flanders and the Netherlands. First, the volume of the news coverage is much higher in Flanders: Flemish newspapers published more than twice as many articles as Dutch newspapers. This shows that issues such as Syria fighters more easily pass the ‘news threshold’ in Flanders than in the Netherlands. This can partly be explained by a focus on the lives of Flemish converts such as Jejoen and Brian and their families, yielding higher number of articles published in an episodic format in Flanders. This episodic coverage probably kept the topic ‘newsworthy’ in the eyes of the public, with people curious to know what would become of these young men. The newsworthiness of the topic was further fed by the quoted actors in Flanders, who frequently use problematizing frames, indicating that the issue is presented as a very problematic situation and young men as being at risk to be ‘seduced’ by Muslims in a moment of weakness. An important question is to what extent the use of episodic and problematic frames in Flanders has affected the attribution of responsibility for the departure of the Syria fighters with Muslims in specific, instead of society as a whole.

Furthermore, the frame use by the various actors confirms that frame-advocates typically present a frame that serves their interests: family members and both national and local governments use the frames that best fit with their collective or personal agendas. Moreover, the findings indicate that in-group favoritism and social identity theory may have an impact on the way people interpret the world around them and could provide a possible explanation for the divide in Dutch public opinion regarding Syria fighters reported by Moha and Bovendeert (2013). Muslim-actors are more likely to use less problematic frames compared to non-Muslim actors. Apparently, when people consider Syria fighters as part of their in-group, they tend to interpret their role as heroic (i.e. the ‘Don Quixote’ frame).

Analyzing news coverage over a certain time period allows to grasp the key events as well as the main actors who have sparked and retained media attention to the issue. It has become apparent that the definitions of in- and out-groups vary according to the actors quoted or paraphrased in newspapers. Journalists in the Netherlands and Flanders are mostly born in Europe with a secular or Judeo-Christian background (Pleijter, Hermand & Vergeer, 2012; Raeymaeckers, Paulussen & De Keyser, 2012). Thus, they are more likely to maintain good relationships with frame-advocates of similar backgrounds, consequently making more frequent use of such sponsors’ frames instead of looking for alternative perspectives or reframing their frames. This might endanger the balanced view of the issues in society, which is so critical to a pluralistic media landscape and a well-functioning democracy. More diversity in the journalism sector could ensure a more balanced public debate and increase the amount of interpretations offered to the public, thereby offering a more realistic picture of this multifaceted issue. However, a part of this imbalance is related to the tendency of the news sector to focus on negative news (Harcup & O’Neill, 2001). Moreover, journalists are often not aware of the frames they use (Mara, 2013) and editors often reframe the journalist frames so they do not have final say on the content (Brüggemann, 2014). Hence more research is needed

on the way frames are constructed in the newsroom and how the pluralistic media landscape can be maintained.

Some level of subjectivity is unavoidable in the academic process as researchers are individuals with their own cultural background and in-groups, bringing along a repertoire of frames that seem ‘natural’ to them. This might make it more difficult for the researcher during both the inductive and deductive coding to recognize the frames ‘natural’ to their own cultural background. The first author of the current study is native Dutch and not religious, and has therefore extensively discussed the framing typology with both Flemish and Muslim researchers to safeguard validity. Moreover, extensive coding cycles were applied, contributing to the relatively high reliability.

Further research would be especially useful in at least two areas: the genesis of the frame construction in the newsroom, especially the role of journalists in frame construction (Brüggemann, 2014) and inter-media agenda setting; impact on audience segments according to media exposure and disposition towards certain framing repertoires. Although research mapping the entire framing process is rare, such an integrative approach is especially valuable as it may explain the origins of the media content, as well as its possible outcomes (De Vreese, 2012; Matthes, 2012). Flanders would be the most appropriate setting to study the entire framing process of the Syria’ fighters, as the case generated a great deal of attention there. The reception of the Syria fighter frames should also be discussed with Moroccan Flemish people, who are most often associated with ‘Syria fighters’ in media content.

As online social media offer vital possibilities in addition to mainstream media research, especially to explore hard-to-reach groups, a follow-up to this study will consist of an analysis of ethnic discussion fora (EDF). The goal is to grasp how the agenda setting-function of particular news frames and actors discerned in the news coverage are echoed in the online

sphere and public opinion. Additionally, the reception of particular frames can be assessed, by including online discourses, which encompass both news frames and audience frames voiced by ethnic and/or mainstream audience segments. The reception of news frames and audience frame analysis can then be combined in the analysis of ethnic discussion forums online (EDFs) and mainstream discussion forums (MDFs). These sites contain newspaper articles, followed by online conversations about the merits of the arguments brought forth in the article. Such a multi-method and multisite approach makes it possible to study the reception of the frames among in- and out-groups, as well as the emergence of possible alternative frames not used in mainstream media. Alternative frames or counterframes can be important as they may function as a deterrent to radicalization amongst youngsters by offering an alternative to the proliferation of online fundamentalist discourse and negative societal constructions.

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ⁱ The word 'Syria fighter' has acquired a certain connotation because it is not used entirely neutral in the media and politics. We use this term to refer to individuals who travel to Syria to take part in the conflict, while they themselves do not have the Syrian nationality.

ⁱⁱ 'Flemish' refers to Dutch-speaking Belgians who live in the northern part of Belgium (i.e. Flanders).

ⁱⁱⁱ To my knowledge, no studies on news media framing of Muslims and Islam have been conducted in Flanders. However, there have been several interesting studies on the political and media discourse on Islam and multiculturalism in Flanders (see Arnuat, Bracke, Ceuppens, De Mul, Fadil & Kanmaz, 2009; Maly, 2007).

^{iv} The Netherlands: ("polder-jihadist" OR "polderjihadisten" OR "Nederlandse Strijders" OR "Nederlandse Moslims" OR "Nederlandse Moslim" OR jihadreizigers OR jihadreis OR jihadtourisme OR "Nederlandse radicalen" OR "Nederlandse jihadisten" OR polderjihadist OR "Nederlandse jongeren" OR radicalisatie OR radicale) AND (Syrië OR Syrisch OR Syrische).

^v The study is explorative in nature. Hence, we were mostly interested in the largest predictors of each frame so we used a backwards Wald step method for adding the predictors to the model. Wald statistics and iterations are available on request from first author.